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AUTHOR	Brown, Bettina Lankard
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ABSTRACT

Career and technical education (CTE) instructors can use four strategies to present a new image of CTE as a viable strategy for education and work. Strategy 1 is to give students something to brag about. Three ways to help students see their vocational studies as unique and special opportunities for satisfying and rich experiences are to provide stimulating, innovative activities that students can appreciate, learn from, and share with their peers; get state-of-the-art equipment or at least provide students access to it; and highlight the marketability of CTE program completers. Strategy 2 is to bring parents inboard. Two strategies for convincing parents to consider CTE are to address misconceptions about the need for all students to seek college diplomas and to describe CTE options that might better meet the needs of their children. Strategy 3 is to target marketing to those who have the greatest impact on student choices. Three steps for recruiting certain groups into CTE's corner are to reeducate guidance counselors, look to student organizations for influence, and cultivate support of business/industry representatives. Strategy 4 is to work with media. (10 references) (YLB)

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Bettina Lankard Brown

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Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

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by Bettina Lankard Brown
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The Image of Career and Technical Education

Parents, students, and employers still hold stereotypes about career and technical education (CTE). This *Practice Application Brief* presents strategies career and technical educators can use to present a new image of CTE as a viable strategy for education and work, including proactive approaches to enhancing the reputation of CTE programs, bringing parents up to date on labor market information, marketing CTE to the local community, and working with media to recognize exemplary programs and outstanding student achievements.

Strategy #1: Give Students Something to Brag About

High school students care about their image—what their peers and others think about them and what they do. One of the benefits that athletes get from excelling in sports is that their challenges and accomplishments are visible to the entire study body, which in turn gives them a heightened sense of self-esteem. CTE programs can offer opportunities for students to heighten their sense of self-worth by engaging them in unique dimensions of learning that extend beyond the traditional classroom. Three ways to help students see their vocational studies as unique and special opportunities for satisfying and rich experiences are as follows.

Provide Stimulating, Innovative Activities that Students Can Appreciate, Learn from, and Share with Their Peers

In a Gallup Organization survey commissioned by the International Technology Education Association (ITEA), 92 percent believed that ensuring technological literacy should be a goal for all schools (Rose and Dugger 2002). As a special benefit to its members, the ITEA developed a series of activities that educators can use to help students expand their knowledge of computers and their uses that extend beyond the typical word processing, graphics design, and games. The activities have been provided by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Jet Propulsion Laboratory and were developed to serve students of varying grade levels.

The second in the series, an activity titled "Beacon Monitor Experiment on Deep Space 1" (Shope 1998), introduces students to "some of the latest and most advanced technologies being tested for use on space missions of the future...incorporating hands-on technology education and science experiences, language arts, and kinesthetic and art activities" (p. 31). Activities like this, which expose students to real-life advanced application of technology, give them the advantage of knowing something that most people do not know. The students become able to describe these newly designed, industry-based activities to their parents and peers and demonstrate how these activities have led them to solve problems that are relevant in the evolving workplace. Proud of their experiences and accomplishments, these students can provide testimonials that do much to improve the image of CTE.

Get State-of-the-Art Equipment or at Least Provide Students Access to It

Improving the image of CTE is greatly facilitated when state-of-the-art equipment is available for students to use when engaging in hands-on learning. Working with equipment that meets workplace standards and is used by industry workers not only improves the quality of learning, but is also perceived by students as being "cool" (Ries 1998). Some ways of obtaining such equipment are to seek out grants, purchase equipment that industries are replacing for newer versions, or ask business and industry to donate items or provide work-based learning sites where students can be exposed to new technology and its use (ibid.).

Highlight the Marketability of CTE Program Completers

Lack of accurate labor market information may cause students to overlook career and technical education because they believe that only a college degree will ensure employment success. The reality is that technical employment is the fastest-growing segment of the labor market and most technical occupations require an associate's degree rather than a four-year college degree (Wonacott 2000). People who work in these occupations can expect to earn substantial entry-level salaries, salaries that have increased 24% in recent years. Automotive technicians, for example, can earn $40,000-$50,000 in some markets (Kerka 2000).

Strategy #2: Bring Parents on Board

Traditionally, parents have perceived that a four-year college degree will guarantee their children employment success. Parents will not alter their opinions about college as the sole avenue to a satisfying career until something persuades them to think otherwise. Following are three strategies for convincing parents.

Address Misconceptions about the Need for All Students to Seek College Degrees

Host conferences or special sessions to help parents understand that college may not be the best educational alternative for every student. Explain that even though parents may desire their children to attend college, not all of these children will have the interest or aptitude to succeed in an academic four-year college degree program. Many business, education, and government leaders have pointed out that too many young people go to college because they don't know what else to do and as a result are wasting time and money for a college education that they are unlikely to complete. These leaders believe that trade and technical schools should offer more appealing options for high school graduates (Cohen and Besharow 2002).

Describe CTE Options that Might Better Meet the Needs of Their Children

To help parents see CTE as a viable option for career preparation, connect programs to the high standards and rigorous academics designed to prepare students for the large and rapidly growing number of careers (Cohen and Besharow 2002). For example, it is estimated that "one million new programming jobs come open in the next nine years" and many more million positions are begging for skilled welders and machinists, electricians and plumbers, healthcare workers, and repair people of all types (Wonacott 2000, p. 1). Inform parents of the high-paying technical careers that are available to students who have mastered specific occupational skills through participation in secondary and postsecondary career and technical programs or apprenticeship programs (ibid.).

Strategy #3: Target Marketing to Those Who Have the Greatest Impact on Student Choices

Although the purpose of marketing is to persuade more students and parents to embrace CTE, it must also address the improvement of CTE's image. When addressing the changing of image, it is important to understand the nature of groups that must be influenced and the types of communication activities that most effectively reach each group (Martin 1998). Three groups that could have a positive role in

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image building are guidance counselors, student organizations, and local business representatives. Steps for recruiting these groups into CTE's corner follow.

Reeducate Guidance Counselors

Guidance counselors have a great deal of influence on both parents and students because they are in the role of offering postsecondary guidance. Many guidance counselors overlook CTE and focus only on the four-year college option. This is likely because they have "no training in job counseling, have little knowledge of the job market for high school graduates, and lack contacts with employers" (Cohen and Besharow 2002, p. 17). CTE advocates must work to ensure that school counselors understand the benefits of CTE and how it fits into the school curriculum and leads to successful postsecondary experiences that prepare students for employment. Huss and Banks (2001) suggest that guidance counselors be recruited to serve on advisory committees for CTE programs; invited to attend department meetings, curriculum meetings, and meetings with business partners; and given information and success stories about students that reveal their performance in school or recognition once they graduate.

Look to Student Organizations for Influence

Student organizations need to promote and publish the benefits of belonging to CTE student organizations as a way of encouraging more students to consider CTE programs of study. Word of mouth is one way members of these organizations can communicate the benefits of membership. Croom and Flowers (2001) found that the primary reason that students joined FFA was for the social aspects of membership—because it satisfied their need for contact with others, intimacy, and a sense of belonging. Articles in organization newsletters and publications as well as those written for local newspapers should highlight student organization activities in their social context.

Student organizations can also use the media to recognize members of minority groups that are underrepresented in the various occupations. For example, minority students are less likely than nonminority students to consider careers in agriculture, possibly because they have more negative perceptions about that choice and because they have fewer role models (Croom and Flowers 2001). Student organizations can help to change these perceptions by highlighting the activities and accomplishments of minority students whenever possible.

Cultivate Support of Business/Industry Representatives

Open your school and the doors of your classroom to businesses so they can see what CTE is doing to prepare students for work in various occupations and link learning activities to the workplace. Stratford High School in South Carolina decided to combat the stigma sometimes associated with CTE by hosting a business and education symposium to get parents, business leaders, and educators communicating about CTE. The program's main goals were to educate parents about the changing demands of the workplace, give business leaders an opportunity to provide their input about workplace needs, improve communication among the participants, and welcome stakeholders into the school where they could observe classes. As a result, teachers became more aware of CTE program offerings and the skill development they encouraged, business leaders were led to establish partnerships with the schools, and networks were developed to enable business employees to fill teacher vacancies (Westberry 2001).

Strategy #4: Work with Media

There is no way to improve the image of CTE unless the quality of CTE programs, program outcomes, and student success stories are communicated to the public. Career and technical educators must see that information about students' achievements, graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment, and employment outcomes is disseminated to students, parents, guidance counselors, teachers in the school system, and community leaders. They must volunteer to serve on committees that deal with educational issues at the state, local, and community level so that the voice of CTE is heard. They should take write articles on programs and program features for local newspapers, bring members of media groups into the schools and to serve on task forces, and otherwise acquaint business and industry leaders with facts about the school's CTE programs.

Summary

Changing some of the negative perceptions that persist about CTE cannot happen over night. It is a continuous process that relies on career and technical educators to provide programs of high quality that lead to skill development and successful job placements for students who have mastered relevant occupational skills and are committed to lifelong learning. Continuous attention to image building can serve to trigger ongoing curriculum analysis and renewal to ensure that CTE maintains high-quality programs and provides needs-driven staff development activities that can contribute to the professional development of teachers, counselors, and other school personnel (Martin 1998).

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